



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### Statement on Freedom of Movement

As prepared for delivery by Marc Meznar,  
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to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting  
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Mr. Moderator, as we celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Final Act, we also celebrate the fact that the right to freedom of movement is now widely respected throughout the OSCE region. This is a great accomplishment. Thirty years ago many governments imposed heavy restrictions on the domestic and international migration of their citizens; today it is rare to hear of cases in which individuals have been prevented from moving. The fall of the Berlin Wall 15 years ago was the most potent example of citizens demanding – and winning – the right to travel outside their own country to reunite with their family members abroad; of course, other less visible changes have also made enormous differences to individuals everywhere. Yet despite dramatic change, notable problems persist.

The old Soviet-era system of exit visas is one of those problems. We urge participating States that retain this system to abolish it, because selective enforcement of procedures can be used to repress opposition groups. Even in countries where exit visas are generally granted, human rights activists have faced undue visa delays and difficulties. In August, Uzbek authorities toughened regulations for traveling abroad, requiring an official seal approving the residence registration stamp in their passports. Without such a seal, travelers cannot buy train or air tickets to travel abroad. In Turkmenistan, despite the elimination of the exit visa regime, the government maintained a “black list” of individuals not allowed to travel, including some members of minority religious groups, regime opponents, relatives of those implicated in the alleged coup of November 2002, and those suspected of holding state secrets.

Freedom of movement means that individuals have both the right to travel abroad and return home again and the right to reside in, travel to, or work in any part of their own countries without interference. The domestic aspect of freedom of movement is widely respected, but not universally applied in the OSCE region. Although it violates OSCE commitments, the *propiska*, or residency registration requirement, is still used in a number of participating States to control the movement of citizens. For example, Azerbaijan permits Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), most of whom fled their homes as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to live only in approved areas.

In Russia, some regional governments continued to restrict individuals’ right to choose their place of residence using rules closely resembling the Soviet-era *propiska* system. Citizens changing residence within the country and persons with a legal claim to citizenship who move to Russia from other former Soviet republics often face bureaucratic delays or corruption, or simply are not permitted to register in some cities. In some cases, this disproportionately affects ethnic or racial minorities, such as Meskhetian Turks and people believed to be from the Caucasus.

Moscow's registration requirement, a source of income for unscrupulous police officers and others, remains in force. Some regional authorities refuse government services or fine residents without proper registration, making it difficult or prohibitive for citizens to live where they want if faced with registration difficulties. The United States urges the Government of the Russian Federation to ensure the rights of all of its citizens to freedom of movement, including the ability to choose freely their place of residence. The burdensome registration requirements in place in some Russian cities should be replaced with a simple and less expensive information system.

Freedom of movement can be restricted in other ways. Earlier this year, the Lukashenko regime in Minsk tightened controls on Belarusians wanting to work or study abroad. While some of these measures serve legitimate anti-human trafficking purposes, others are ripe for abuse as tools to simply monitor and restrict legitimate travel. Similarly, Turkmenistan maintains a black list of persons who are forbidden from traveling internationally. These practices violate OSCE commitments under the 1989 Vienna Document and must end.

Mr. Moderator, in the Vienna Document, the OSCE participating States agreed “to fully respect the right of everyone to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State, and to leave any country, including his [or her] own, and to return to his [or her] own.” More than 15 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is time to dismantle the remaining artificial barriers that frustrate the right to freedom of movement.